

## **Greetings**

Acknowledging the existence of another human being and taking time to relate to him or her in a personal way is a priority in Mauritanian society. It is away to achieve the goal of harmony and peace in the community. Every member of the community is expected to greet every other member regardless of status or wealth. This is a way to show respect for all members of the community whether they are rich, poor, noble or of slave origin. Each has an important role to fulfill.

A successful interaction with a Mauritanian often depends on establishing this first contact, whether in the market, on the street, in the office or over the telephone. Consequently, a great deal of time is spent in exchanging greetings back and forth before actually broaching a subject. People are taken back if you do not greet before beginning a conversation - even if you only want to ask a question. Indeed, without greeting first, you may run into a hostile or negative attitude from the person you need to do business with, consult, ask directions, etc. In addition, it gives Mauritanians great pleasure to hear foreigners greet them in a local language. A simple *Bonjour* and a few *Ca va* will suffice for those who do not know the local language.

Shaking hands is also a part of the greeting process with men shaking hand with other men and women with other women. Some Mauritanian men will extend their hand to western women and others will choose a different form of greeting. It is because a strict interpretation of the Koran prohibits men contact with women who are not their wives or close relatives. Mauritanian women shake hands quite freely with all women.

Touching one's heart with the hand that was extended during the handshake is a fairly recent addition to the culture of greeting. The demonstration means that there is a place for you in my heart. When a Mauritanian male does not shake a western woman's hand, often he will touch his heart as a sign of respect. A gesture with similar meaning is the grasping of both of hands in front of the chest. Another form to demonstrate respect is to hold the elbow of the extended hand during a handshake. When one is working or eating, the wrist may be offered instead of the hand.

When greeting elders, the elder is greeted first and direct eye contact should be avoided. Also, physical affection for a loved one or emotion in general is not openly shown in public.